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# THE DEEP EFFECTS OF ARMED CONFLICT: INTERVENING IN THE COMPLEXITIES OF POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION

Those exposed to armed conflict, as victims or combatants, are typically subjected to extremely stressful situations such as massive displacement, forced recruitment (some while under-age) and a long string of human rights abuses. Colombia constitutes an archetypical case of a society that has been massively and chronically exposed to a wide array of armed conflict experiences. But many peacebuilding initiatives have also taken ground.

A recent example comes from negotiations between the Colombian Government and the paramilitary confederation known as the AUC, between 2003 and 2016, and the peace process with the Farc guerrillas between 2012 and 2016, both of which led to massive demobilisations and the start of ambitious peacebuilding programs, some of which are still active today.

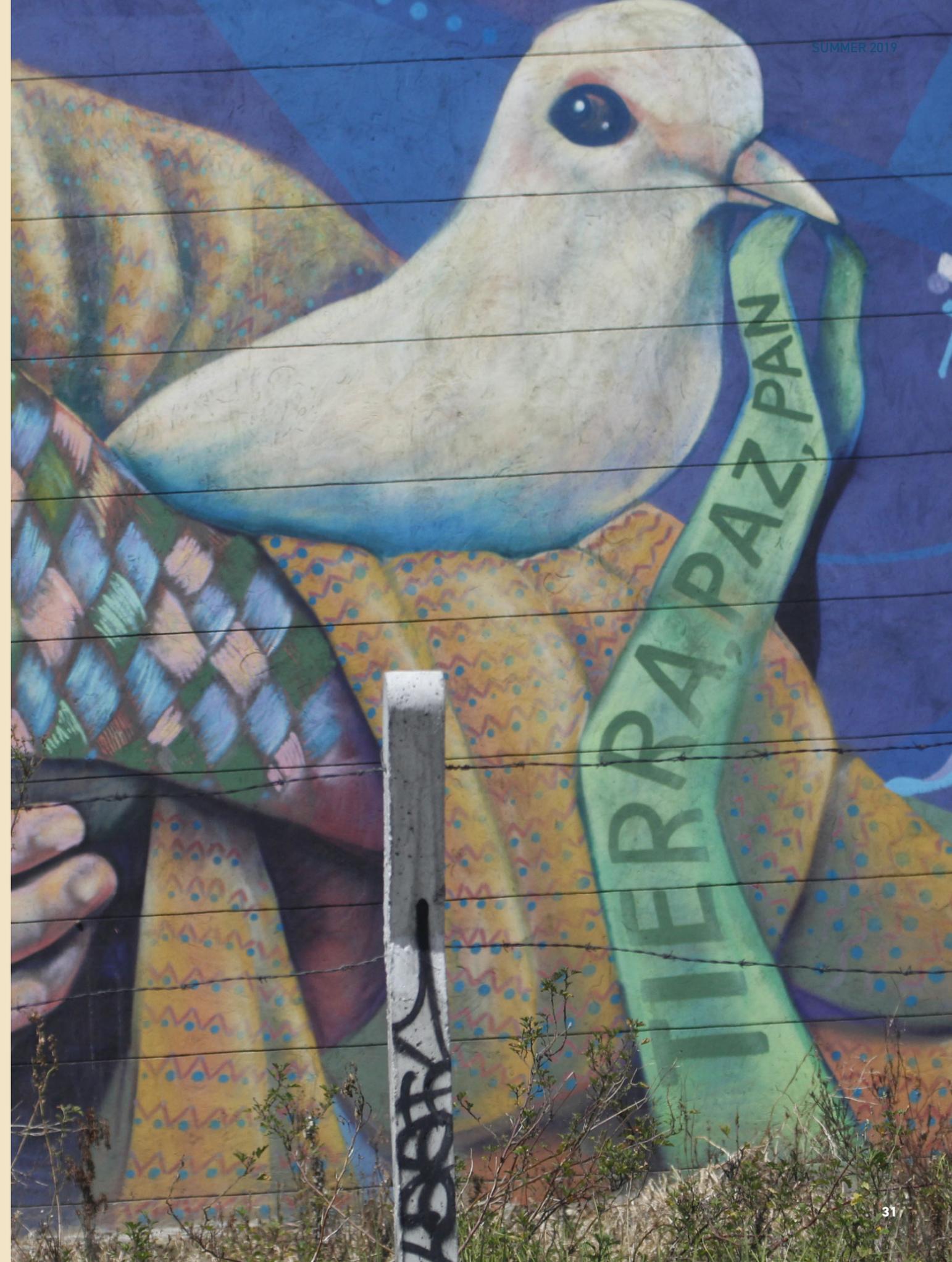
Those peace agreements opened unique opportunities for peacebuilding initiatives, led by state authorities or by civil society, aimed to alleviate the negative impacts of protracted violence, such as:

- Reducing the gap between public services offered by state institutions in armed conflict-affected rural areas and major urban centres
- Re-establishing social capital among affected communities through reconciliation strategies
- Strengthening public policies for reintegration of former combatants to civil life where, by promoting personal and occupational abilities it is expected to (a) limit recidivism into criminal activity, and (b) promote safer and more peaceful environments for communities where they reside
- Attending war victims in terms of individual and collective psychosocial assistance and reparation measures

While the depth of Colombia's legal and institutional resources for focusing on both victims and ex-combatants can be hailed as amongst the most robust in the world, translating successful cases of reintegration or victim reparation into tangible and replicable programs remains elusive. In fact, accumulating evidence demonstrate the persisting high level of societal divisions between communities, victims and former combatants in post-conflict societies long after conflict has ended, such as in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, DRC Congo, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The Colombian case is no different. A series of peace accords signed between armed groups and Governments since 1989 have not translated into harmonious relations between former combatants, victims and receiving communities. Moreover, war-related antagonisms have translated into prejudice and distrust experienced on a daily basis in post-conflict contexts, which have translated into social and ideological cleavages and polarisation.

Within the context of complex interactions between macro-level policies and individual-level attention to war-exposed populations, we first mapped out the key social, biological, and psychological factors that render war victims and ex-combatants apart from less violence-exposed segments of society. With that goal in mind, we have explored the adaptive behaviour and disposition of individuals with different degrees of chronic exposure to conflict (CEtC) for the last ten years.



In particular, our line of research has focused on characterising how the processing of emotions, cognition, disposition and behaviour are reorganised in people's minds as a result of exposure to heavily stressful and traumatic situations that are directly linked to armed conflict. In the case of ex-combatants, for instance, we have hypothesised that particular combat experiences will modify emotional recognition processes; behavioural responses associated to regulatory systems for aggression, and even attitudes and dispositions towards ingroups and outgroups such as former allies or antagonists.

In collaboration with the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN), we have tested and implemented a series of procedures and methodologies aimed not only to enhance government-led intervention activities, but also to systematically collect data for the purposes of testing our hypotheses about the deep effects of armed conflict. Some of our results have led to the formal incorporation of our empirically-tested methods and procedures to the official ARN reintegration strategies.

One result from our decade-long research program is the identification of how exposure to armed conflict-related extreme situations forces people's neural networks in ways that increase their self-sense of insecurity, and reduce their ability to regulate their aggressive behaviour. However, these individuals do not necessarily lose their ability to re-adapt some brain mechanisms to positively deal with new social interactions, in the context of a post-conflict setting.

For instance, former combatants show an enhanced brain response to faces, when compared to non-combatants. Thus, they seem to 'read' facial expressions in a shorter time and with similar precision. In this context, faster face-reading patterns might be a crucial opportunity to later help them to improve efficacy during the analysis of social cues. In fact, former combatants' more assertive behaviour through specific social interactions, in comparison with individuals with no combat history, are a key aspect that should be not only acknowledged but also taken advantage of in the contexts of interventions aimed to produce reintegration and/or reconciliation outcomes.



### CAN WE IMPROVE REINTEGRATION PROCESSES THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING?

In the absence of valid evaluative research, we cannot establish the causal effects of the official reintegration program's activities on emotional, cognitive and behavioural re-adaptation in former combatants.

In order to start filling that gap, we have collaborated with the ARN to test a specific emotional recognition strategy, in the hope of observing post-intervention reductions in aggressive behaviour, and improvements in social skills. Here, we focused on training individuals to better recognise emotional visual expressions and social clues, so they could perform in a more adaptive manner during social situations.

For measuring purposes, we created both baseline and follow-up evaluations of those receiving the training in addition to their regular official programmes, as well as those former combatants who did not receive it. We identified that, in comparison with conventional intervention, this added training module helps us explain increased levels of emotional recognition – such as properly distinguishing emotions in human faces – and higher average 'think twice' responses before potential displays of aggressive behaviour.

Despite the effectiveness of such social cognitive training strategies, the future direction of research lies on personalising the contents of the given training, based on the individuals' own baseline profile. We believe that the absence of this approach might be preventing the implementation of more cost-effective strategies that could increase the effectiveness of the current reintegration program.

In the near future, we envisage that such approach will not only strengthen subjects' basic social skills, but also will prepare them for community-based activities aimed to restore perception of safety and social capital. We predict that restoring trust within communities, and reducing intergroup polarisation, are key steps to change the current status quo of fear, intergroup avoidance, and prejudices. Ultimately, ex-combatants' exposure to positive

community-based experiences should lead to more tangible reintegration outcomes.

Interdisciplinary academic networks are crucial to develop this approach. For instance, it is critical to have the involvement of researchers coming from the health and social sciences, especially those who work collaboratively in projects tackling stigmas and prejudices.

The Colombian context of post-conflict complexities is not unique. Hence, we anticipate that our current findings from this setting can potentially be adapted to other countries facing similar challenges. Acknowledging the deep effects of conflict, and then addressing them through tested techniques, already taking us one step towards overcoming the daunting task of rebuilding societies after war.

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